



HAL
open science

Service Work - Critical Perspectives - edited by Marek Korczynski and Cameron Lynne Macdonald (Book review)

Philippe Méhaut

► **To cite this version:**

Philippe Méhaut. Service Work - Critical Perspectives - edited by Marek Korczynski and Cameron Lynne Macdonald (Book review). *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2012, 50 (1), pp.183-185. 10.1111/j.1467-8543.2011.00879_9.x . halshs-00671133

HAL Id: halshs-00671133

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00671133>

Submitted on 16 Feb 2014

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Service Work – Critical Perspectives edited by Marek Korczynski and Cameron Lynne Macdonald. Routledge – Taylor and Francis Group, New York and London, 2009, 195pp, ISBN 0 415 95317 0, £21.59, paperback.

The worlds of service work are expanding. This edited volume offers readers a wide-ranging journey through those worlds. More than a mere survey, it holds a mirror up to the most contemporary critical approaches to service work. It is a book based on research and will also be useful to advanced students, who will find it provides a comprehensive, conceptualised and critical review of the current state of the art in the field. The book's nine chapters are all written by authors with recognised expertise in the field. They are preceded by an introduction (M. Korczynski and C. L. Macdonald) and followed by a conclusion (Yiannis Gabriel) in which they are put into perspective and suggestions are made for interesting avenues of research to be explored in future. The worlds of service work examined in this book encompass an increasing number and diversity of activities. The chapters all draw on a set of research results covering, among other areas, call centres, leisure parks, personal care and retailing. The particular activity (or activities) under investigation varies from chapter to chapter; this shifting focus ensures that the book as a whole offers plentiful empirical material and some valuable bibliographies.

This book shows how worlds of service work are both shaped by and help to shape, albeit it to varying degrees, the process of globalisation. Some chapters (such as three –G.Ritzer and C.D. Lair- and eight – R.S. Parrenas-) particularly highlight this issue, whether it be approached through the diffusion of norms, through phenomena associated with rationalisation, through a process of 'soft diffusion' based on changes in consumer expectations and behaviour or even through the evolution of value chains and the economic relations linking migrant care workers in the developed countries and their employees in their country of origin.

This book's chapters also show a unity of the worlds of service work in a different way, by reference to a 'magic triangle' formed by the relations between consumers, employers and employees. While all the contributions implicitly or explicitly accept the notion of this triangle, each one places more or less emphasis on one or other of these relations and hence on the plurality of actors in these worlds.

However, the main value of the book lies in the variety of conceptual approaches that it brings together. As noted in the introduction (p.3), 'there have been few attempts to develop our theoretical understanding across various types of service work *per se*'. The book provides sound evidences of the progress in this field, even if we are far away from an unified theory. Thus each chapter offers its own conceptual approach, often linked to a particular school of thought within the discipline. Based on a very detailed analysis of the Red Moon Café scene in *Modern Times*, Chapter 2 (J. Sayers and N. Monin) demonstrates the value of an approach based on art and history. The questions raised by the notions of emotional or aesthetic labour are encountered once again here. The emphasis is on the need for, and power of, a critical approach to a form of oppression that is very much a continuation of that found in the industrial world.

Chapter 3 examines the 'globalisation of nothing' hypothesis. It is true that off-shoring and outsourcing transfer certain forms of work from one continent to another. In the case of service work, however, they also contribute to the development of 'globalisation' (the imposition of the global on the local) and its corollary 'nothing', i.e. a disembodied form of product and production, lacking any distinctive content or societal rootedness. It is not simply the forms but also the very nature of work (and hence of workers' identity) that are being transformed. Chapter 4 (A. Bryman) continues this debate. Here, 'MacDonaldisation' and 'Disneyisation' are linked through an analysis of their common roots and the interactions between them. The four dimensions of Disneyisation (theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising and emotional labour (p 36.)) form a

particular set, with a strong emphasis on transformation of the modes of consumption rather than on the rationalisation of production.

The following chapter (5 –M Korczynski-) advances a somewhat contrary argument. In order to understand the contradictory experience of service workers, it is necessary to construct an interpretative framework which, while retaining the main categories of bureaucratic rationalisation, reformulates their contents. The ‘customer-oriented bureaucracy’ is a new ideal type, it is argued, which, when combined with political economy, would provide a basis for analysing the various developments in service work. However, the following chapter (Chapter 6 –C. Warhurst, P Thompson and D. Nickson-) raises the question of whether we really need a new theoretical framework. Labour process theory, it is argued, can be applied to service work provided such work is resituated within the fundamental principles of capitalism and emotional and aesthetic labour are incorporated into the existing theoretical framework.

Pursuing the theme of the emotional proletariat and focusing on the new forms of discrimination, Chapter 7 (C.L. Macdonald and D. Merrill) draws on theories of intersectionality in order to gain a clearer understanding of gender and racial divisions. Here, the ‘phantasmatic’ notions of the consumer that employers develop structure their hiring practices, which come up against the innermost personality of emotional workers. While care work cannot be off-shored, it is nevertheless caught up in the globalisation of value chains. This is the argument put forward in Chapter 8, in which the relations of economic dependency between migrant care workers in the developed countries and their employees in their countries of origin are examined. Simultaneously employees and employers, they force us to move outside the ‘magic triangle’ and to incorporate welfare state policies in the developed world into the analytical framework.

Chapter 9 (D. S. Cobble and M. Merrill) brings the reader back to the magic triangle, with the emphasis this time on industrial relations. The prospects for unionising and/or organising service workers in associations or other kinds of representative organisations are less gloomy than they might seem. However, certain conditions, put forward by way of hypotheses requiring further investigation, will have to be fulfilled. Thus any analysis of the prospects for unionisation will have to take full account of the constraints inherent in the relationship with the consumer and not be confined to the classic employer/employee confrontation; questions also have to be raised about service quality and productivity (and hence cost and even the distribution of incomes in society as a whole).

Far from being a patchwork, the book constitutes a dialogue between different conceptual, disciplinary and methodological approaches. However, it is a dialogue that remains unfinished, and it is left to readers to construct this dialogue for themselves. A number of possible avenues are suggested in the introduction. One is to accept diversity as a condition of ‘modernism’, another is to take a dominant concept and develop it. An alternative would be to bring all the various approaches face to face and, out of that confrontation, construct an all-embracing and multi-disciplinary theory. In the conclusion, it is proposed that a psychoanalytical dimension be introduced into the employee/consumer relationship that is one element in the ‘magic triangle’. Thus, while the book opens up some stimulating perspectives, the conditions and feasibility of such complex dialogues have still to be determined.

PHILIPPE MEHAUT
Lest-Umr 6123, Aix en Provence